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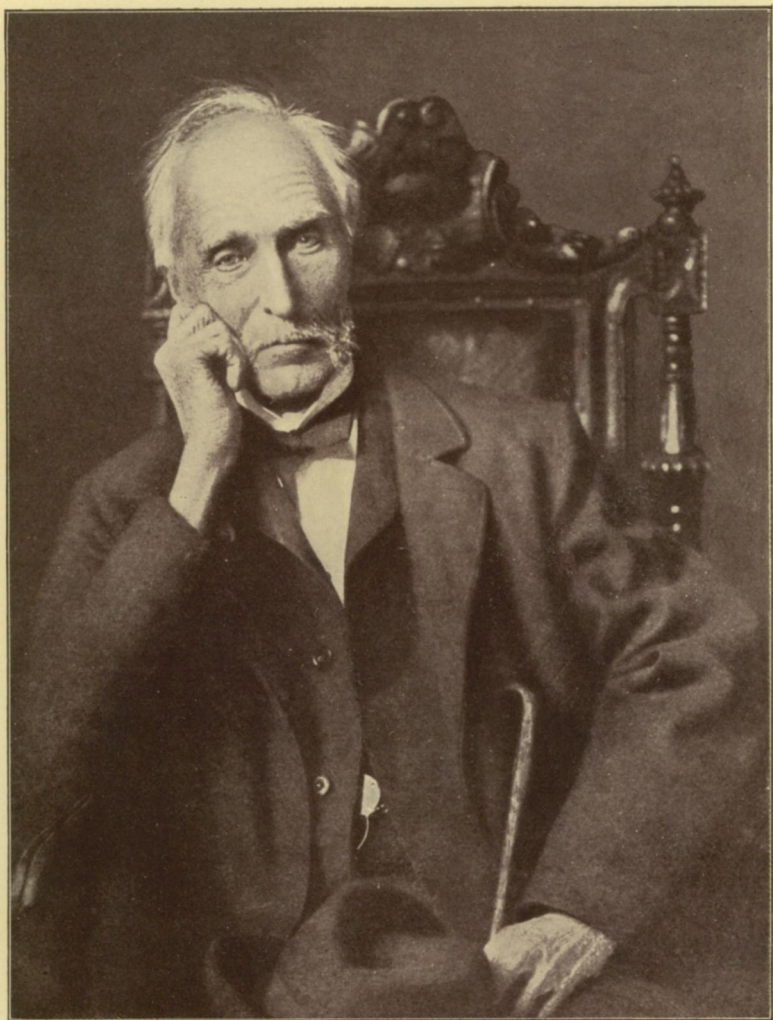
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Goldwin Smith

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THE GREAT MINDS OF AMERICA.

I.—GOLDWIN SMITH.

THERE is a branch of history which, although in our day historians have ceased to deal exclusively with diplomacy, politics and war, receives even yet, but seldom, the separate and careful treatment that might bring out its full significance. In a modern historical narrative we are sure to read, not only about warriors and statesmen, but also about the conquerors in the fields of scientific research, in astronomy, physics, chemistry and biology, about the inventors who enrich mankind with the practical applications of scientific principles, about theologians, legists, men of letters, painters, sculptors and architects. We still hear relatively little, on the other hand, about the men who stand in the background, so far as any active part in public life or special investigation is concerned, but who interpret more or less correctly the meaning of current events, who direct more or less consciously the general tendencies of their contemporaries, and who shape more or less decisively the attitude of their generation towards the problems of daily life. We can exemplify the place occupied and the function discharged by such interested and alert on-lookers, if we recall the part played by Erasmus in the first third, and, less conspicuously, by Montaigne in the last third, of the sixteenth century; by Pascal in the first half, and by

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Hobbes and Locke in the last half, of the seventeenth; by Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau in the eighteenth; by Goethe in the first quarter, and, so far as Britons and Americans could be reached, by Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the third quarter, of the nineteenth century. The comments made by such detached but watchful spectators of the drama unfolded in the struggles, achievements and failures of mankind are illuminative and helpful, because they are uttered from a coign of vantage like the tower imagined by Lucretius as commanding a wide prospect of a tossing sea, a view-point which enables the observer to see social phenomena in their right perspective and true dimensions.

In Western countries, no generation since the Renaissance has been entirely deprived of the benefit derivable from such impartial commentaries and far-sighted suggestions; and, although, from the instinctive disposition to extol times past, we of to-day may conceive ourselves in this respect less happy than our fathers, there is no doubt that we possess on this side of the Atlantic men who, in a certain measure, at least, perform for us the same useful function. Among them may be specified Goldwin Smith and Charles W. Eliot, nor is it disputable that other names will at once recur to the reader's mind. It is mainly as a commentator on contemporary affairs, and on those historical events which have a direct bearing on the present state of things, that we purpose here to mark briefly the work done by Goldwin Smith.

I.

By way of preface, the barest outline of a biography may be desirable. To that purpose, however, we can devote only a few sentences. Goldwin Smith was educated at Eton, after which he matriculated at University College, Oxford, where he not only gained a Double First (a first class in classics and in mathematics), but also the Hertford and Ireland Scholarships (which attest a still higher grade of proficiency in the Greek and Latin languages); the Chancellor's prize for Latin Verse; the Latin Essay prize and the English Essay prize. Early in the fifties, he was appointed, in conjunction with Arthur Stanley (subsequently Dean of Westminster), a Secretary of the Royal Commission appointed to reform the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and in that capacity was credited with doing more

than any or all of his colleagues to bring about the drastic changes which revolutionized those hide-bound institutions. In 1858, he was made Regius Professor of Modern History, the office which was to be filled successively by his coevals, Stubbs, Freeman and Froude. An unflinching and outspoken champion of the North during our Civil War, he visited the United States in 1868; resigned his post at Oxford to become Honorary Professor of English and Constitutional History in Cornell University; and in 1871 went to Canada, where he has since resided.

The list of his published writings is suggestive of the habitual drift of his thought. In the long catalogue, perhaps three works should be specifically mentioned as being the most widely known, the most influential, and the most likely to prove durable, to wit, his "Political History of the United Kingdom"; his "Political History of the United States," which is rather a philosophical disquisition than a pictorial narrative, and for that very reason possesses a peculiar value; and, finally, the compact but full-freighted volume entitled "Essays on Questions of the Day."

In a long-remembered course of lectures, delivered at Oxford, on the statesmen of the Commonwealth, the substance of which is reproduced concisely in "The History of the United Kingdom," Goldwin Smith anticipated Carlyle in forming and impressing conceptions of Eliot, Pym, Hampden and, above all, of Cromwell, which are now generally accepted as correct. Singularly enlightening is his answer to the question, What did Pym and Hampden mean to do with the Church and Commonwealth when they had beaten the King? "The Church, of course, they meant to make Puritan, probably with an episcopate unmitred and reduced in power;" a counterpart, in fact, of what we see in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States; for neither Pym nor Hampden was, in principle, opposed, as the Presbyterians and Independents were, to that form of church government. "As to the Commonwealth, both of them were monarchists, though they wished to put the monarch under parliamentary control." Yet they could never have set Charles I again upon his throne. The conviction, founded upon repeated experience, that no faith could be put in his pledges and concessions, however solemn, was their motive and justification for drawing the sword. To what expedient, then, must they eventually have had recourse? The reply is: "Probably, they would

have done what was done by their political heirs in 1688; they would have kept the monarchy, but changed the dynasty. Lewis, the young Elector-Palatine, son of the Protestant idol, the Electress Elizabeth, had appeared in England, and the eyes of the people had been turned to him." To Goldwin Smith, therefore, it seems not unlikely that, had the party of Pym and Hampden prevailed, the young Elector might have been called to the constitutional throne, to which the patriots of 1688 called William of Orange. Of Cromwell in the same work we read that "he had no love of sabre-sway. Like Cæsar, unlike Napoleon, he had been a politician before he was a soldier, and he had always shown himself loyal in principle to the supremacy of the civil power." Goldwin Smith's researches led him to conclude that Cromwell's aim may fairly be said to have been, "after the closing of the wounds of the Civil War by amnesty, to resettle the Government on a broad national basis," in accordance with the habits and traditions of the people, securing to the nation at the same time the substantial objects, religious and political, the religious objects, above all, for which the civil sword had been drawn. "From the conference which Cromwell held at the critical moment with leading men, soldiers and lawyers, to take soundings of opinion as to the settlement of the Constitution, it appears that his own leaning was in favor of something monarchical, whether with the old or with a new name." Herein Goldwin Smith can see no apostasy. Cromwell had drawn his sword in a religious cause, with which the cause of civil liberty was identified, but had never proclaimed himself a republican, though he had republicans among his brethren in arms, and had, no doubt, listened to them with sympathy, and, perhaps, flattered their aspirations. Evidently, he had been willing to restore the King, if the King could have been bound effectually to mend his ways. "That Cromwell was still true to liberty, Milton, no bad judge, must have been convinced when he wrote his sonnet. Though the poet knew that Cromwell had suffered detraction, yet over this, as over his enemies in war, he hailed him triumphant, and beckoned him on to victories of peace and to the rescue of free conscience, whereof he regards him as the hope." In a word, the true view of Cromwell's character is pronounced to be that which represents him as raised from step to step by circumstances, without far-reaching ambition or settled plan.

In the second volume of his history of "The United Kingdom," Goldwin Smith brought out clearly for the first time the essential and far-reaching difference between the form of federal government created in 1867 by the British North America Act for the Dominion of Canada and that which we see exemplified in the Constitution of the United States. The difference is thus stated in a nutshell: "In the case of Canadian confederation, the national element has been from the first stronger than the federal in this respect, that the residuary power which the American organic law leaves in the States was, by the Canadian Constitution, assigned to the Dominion." Moreover: "The Canadian Constitution, though framed in the main by Canadian politicians, is set forth in an imperial Act of Parliament, subject to repeal or amendment only by the same authority by which it was passed." The inference seems warranted that "a community living under a Constitution imposed by external authority, and without the power of making peace or war, can hardly be said yet to have attained the status of a nation."

The outline of the political history of the United States was recognized at the time of its publication as a marvel of condensation and lucidity. In no other book, whether from the pen of De Tocqueville, or from that of Bryce, has the same field been covered so succinctly and so well. Of the five chapters—there are no more—the first deals with the colonial epoch, the second, with the Revolutionary period, the third and fourth review the history of the Federal Government to the outbreak of the Civil War, and the fifth depicts the era of rupture and reconstruction. Every page of the brief essay is enriched with striking and incisive comments that challenge the reader to reconsider carefully, if not to change, his personal views of historical persons and events.

II.

Among the living and urgent problems examined in the volume comprising "Essays on Questions of the Day," none is now more opportune and useful than that which considers the prospect and the inevitable limits of social and industrial revolution. It should be, of course, kept in mind that the standpoint of Goldwin Smith is that of a Liberal of the old school as yet unconverted to State Socialism, who still looks for further improvement, not to increased Governmental interference, but to individual effort,

free association and the same agencies, moral, intellectual and economical, which have brought us thus far, and one of which, science, is now operating with immensely augmented power. In a word, Goldwin Smith accounts it the function of Government to protect these agencies, not to supersede them. Obviously, a writer of this school can have no panacea or nostrum to offer; and, when a nostrum or panacea is offered, he will, necessarily, be found rather on the critical than on the effusive side. He will look for advancement, not for regeneration; expect improvement still to be, as it has been, gradual; and hope much from steady, calm and harmonious effort, little from violence or revolution.

Not that he lacks deep and fervent sympathy with the effort of reformers to relieve the mass of working-men from social and political disabilities. No man with a brain and a heart, he says, can fail to be penetrated with a sense of the unequal distribution of wealth, or to be willing to try any experiment which may hold out a reasonable hope of putting an end to poverty. By the success of such an experiment, the happiness of the rich, of such, at least, of them as are good men, would be increased far more than their riches would be diminished. Only the Nihilist, however, would desire blindly to plunge society into chaos. Goldwin Smith sees that it is plainly beyond man's power to alter the fundamental conditions of his being. "There are inequalities, greater even than those of wealth, which are fixed, not by human lawgivers, but by nature, such as those of health, strength, intellectual power and length of life; and these draw other inequalities with them. Justice is human. Where inequality is the fiat, not of man, but of a power above man, it is idle for any practical purpose to assail it as injustice."

No doubt the difference between a good and a bad workman is, partly at least, the act of nature; but to give the same wages to the good workman and the bad, as Communists propose, while it might be just from some superhuman point of view, would yet, from the only view-point which mankind can practically attain, be pronounced by Goldwin Smith unjust. While the limits, however, of human progress are thus clearly perceived, Goldwin Smith is no pessimist. On the whole, his view of man's future is a sanguine one. He keeps in view the fact that steady industry, aided by the ever-growing powers of practical science,

is rapidly augmenting wealth. He can discern no cause for doubting that thrift and increased facilities for saving and for the employment of small capitals, will promote the equality of distribution. "Let Governments see," he says, "that labor is allowed to enjoy its full earnings, untaxed by war, waste or iniquitous tariffs. The best of all taxes, it has been truly averred, is the smallest. With equal truth it may be said that the best of all Governments is that which has least occasion to govern."

Of recent years Goldwin Smith has evinced, now and then, an inclination to turn his attention from political, social and economical inquiries to the haunting problems concerning a future life and man's relation to the cosmos. Some of his thoughts upon this subject have been set forth in "Rational Religion and Rationalistic Objections"; and in "Guesses at the Riddle of Existence." His specific view-point is that of an agnostic, but of one who recalls tenderly and gratefully the beauty and the nobility with which faith, in elevating and benign religions, has dignified and embellished human nature. Of such blessings he would hold fast to as much as is compatible with a paramount reverence for truth.